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The Truth That Makes Men Free

President Kennedy's request for self-censorship by newspapers coupled with the aftermaths of the Cuban invasion and Cmdr. Shepard's adventure in space puts new emphasis on the problem of news dissemination in a democracy.

Just how much or how little is a democratic people entitled to know about operations of the government it elects?

In any formal self-censorship government guidance would play a decisive role; but are the politician and his appointees the best judges of what is news and what are data helpful to the enemy? Is the press to become merely an instrument of national policy, abandoning or severely curtailing its probing for off-limits information needed to shape balanced public opinion?

The performance of U.S. information officials in the U2 incident and the more recent Cuban fiasco gives no assurance they can be reliable guides. The "news" they want printed isn't necessarily the news.

Even the spaceman's press conference produced misgivings. It was an impressive and good-humored performance by the star but, apparently by design, it produced almost no information. And the conduct of space agency officials had overtones of the arrogance of an 'elite corps' impatient with the queries of laymen.

The latter aspect, almost overlooked in a moment of national elation, illustrates a trend that could threaten the layman's control over his society in a space age that concentrates ever-widening special knowledge in the hands of a few.

What appears to be needed now more than censorship is a greater sense of responsibility in the government's handling of information. The "right to know" is vital.

Secrecy must shroud many phases of our role in the cold war as a counter to the subversive attack of the other side. Newspapers do not challenge this.

But the government must remember it has a responsibility not to misinform the public deliberately, nor to become overzealous in withholding the facts. When this occurs the press must trust its own judgment.

In 1960 when the U2 plane was shot down over Russia, our government hastily and flatly denied any attempt to violate Russian air space and indicated the plane might have strayed on a routine weather charting mission. That was false.

This led to the spectacle of the President of the West's great democracy admitting his government had lied. The excuse was that we had to cover up until we knew the fate of the plane. Silence would have been wiser. The government did not mislead the Russians; it misled the American public.

Before the Cuban invasion it was a well-publicized fact that anti-Castro partisans were being recruited in this country and in some instances being trained in camps in the South. As the invasion began the State Department declared there would be no U.S. intervention, when in fact the Central Intelligence Agency had financed, trained and armed the invaders.

Initially American reporters were told that 5,000 men were involved, propaganda to encourage an uprising in Cuba. Later as the attack floundered Washington moved to play down the failure and soothe American opinion by describing the landing as merely an attempt to take supplies to guerrillas.

The press, handicapped by the initial confusion and by official restrictions, became a tool of government agencies pursuing a disastrous adventure and issuing false information.

Again it was the American people, not Khrushchev or Castro, who were deceived. Our testimony was discredited while the Communists were allowed to pose with the truth.

This censorship by communique quickly was rejected and reporters began digging out the real story, fragments of which are still being uncovered. But the damage already had been done, damage by officials of the United States to the confidence of Americans (and their allies) in their government.

This confidence developed from an informed public opinion is a keystone of our democracy. It must be repaired and preserved. But it cannot survive unless the government believes that the truth will advance, not harm, our cause in the cold war.